

Some Thoughts on the English Stage.

BY TOM TAYLOR.

There are fashions in all arts, as there are fashions in the judgments and opinions about them. As a general rule, in a time of abundant writing, and widely diffused and therefore superficial knowledge, the tendency is to depreciate contemporary art in all its forms. We may note this disposition in current criticism, not only of the theatre, but of poetry, painting, sculpture, and architecture. In all these the spirit of the time is always striving to express itself in new forms which appeal to popular appreciation, and obtain a great deal of it. But those who write about such things, having, or assuming to have, before their minds the labors of a long and illustrious past, are in the habit of contrasting the present with the past, to the detriment, almost invariably, of the present. This is at once an easier task, and one more flattering to the critic's sense of superiority, than fairly and dispassionately to appreciate and account for the performances and position of any contemporary art. But the latter I believe to be a more useful employment of the critical faculty. I propose to attempt such an application of it to the stage, as that form of art of which I have most intimate and practical knowledge. However humiliating, at first sight, to all connected with the stage, may appear the comparison with the past, it is, in fact, as it was in what are called its "golden days," by which I suppose is generally meant the fifty years comprising the last quarter of last century and the first of this, there never was a time of more theatrical activity than the present, if measured by the number of theatres built or rebuilt, and actively occupied, and the provinces, and by the production of new pieces, and whatever their quality. It is a fact beyond dispute that all the London theatres nowadays, and the most considerable provincial ones, devote themselves all but exclusively to contemporary pieces. The old repertoire is only exceptionally and rarely resorted to. The Haymarket Company, on its annual autumnal tour, gives a series of the old comedies in the principal provincial theatres; and one of them is every now and then put up for a few nights in London between the production of the novelties on which the theatre habitually relies; or a star, or aspirant to starry honors, foreign, English, or American, may from time to time appear to public favor in a play of Shakespeare's, or some other of the "old masters" of the drama; but, substantially, the fact is as I state it, that the theatre now lives on novelties. So little is the old drama counted upon, that when it is resorted to, it has none of the advantages or appliances which are lavished on new plays. There is no costuming in preparation, and no elaboration of rehearsals. Any scenery or dresses are good enough for it, any cast will do, the old stage business is acquiesced in. There is, in short, except, perhaps, on the part of the "star" himself, or herself, no application of mind to the business in hand, whether by actor or manager, scene-painter or costumer. This shows that those who are most materially concerned in theatrical property do not value their power to draw on the accumulated wealth of our dramatic past. Thus far, at least, the stage asserts its vitality, that it is a frequent subject of complaint with one school of critics. They find texts for insisting on the sound and remunerative policy of a return to the old drama in the occasional instances in which new life is imparted to old forms by some striking or unfamiliar interpretation—as in the case of Mr. Fechter's "Hamlet," or Madame St. Angelo's "Juliet"—or when interest is excited by the reappearance of an old favorite—as in the instance of Miss Helen Faucit's periodical returns to the stage, or where something like completeness of presentation is attempted—as in the recent run of Macbeth at Drury Lane, with Mr. Beverley's scenery. But the experience of managers testifies against the critics. The old plays, they are unanimous in asserting, as a rule, and where there is no exceptional personal curiosity to be gratified, do not pay. If it was not for the provincial theatres, where the old "stock" plays still form part of the repertoire, we should not find our actors familiar even with the parts of Shakespeare which fall in their line of action. The new plays, and those of any other dramatist, are the speaking blank verse with music and effect is hardly ever found among our younger actors; and with it is gone the whole stage manner of the ideal or poetic drama. Except Shakespeare, indeed, the famous dramatists of Elizabeth and James may be said to be entirely banished from the stage to the library.

This shows, at least, that the theatres depend for support on audiences who are interested in presentations of contemporary subjects, or at least of subjects treated in a contemporary spirit. This is only the reflection in all the theatre of a tendency apparent in all the other representative arts. Old pictures, if it were not for the demand of public and private galleries, would find but a poor market nowadays. It is only those of the highest class, such as the trustees of national collections and the possessors of great family galleries will compete for, that now fetch prices comparable with those commanded by contemporary works. Last century it was all the other way. Then the taste, real or affected, for pictures, was confined to the genuine or mock virtuosi, the men who, on the grand tour, had acquired a relish for the old masters, or the pretension to it. Now the great picture-market is among our merchants, traders, and manufacturers, whose sympathy is all but exclusively for works of their own time. There is something analogous to this in the theatre. Last century the stage lived mainly on the old drama, or on plays which in form and character reflected the past rather than the present. Comedy and farce had even then, it is true, the breath of contemporary life in them. But the serious drama was antique, or aimed at being so. There was no notion of extracting matter for deep or painful emotion out of contemporary life. This was sought exclusively in the ambitions, treacheries, loves, woes of remote and dignified personages, expressing themselves in artificial and stately rhythms. The Gamster is a solitary exception to this rule, and though its subject is contemporary, its form is studiously unnatural. And even comedy, regarded mainly as a dramatic exercise of society, that of the artificial, high-bred upper classes. If it went lower, it was to present some foil to these in a lower class just as artificial, and more unlike any contemporary reality. The great popular wave had not then, in fact, invaded the theatre. We see the rise of it in the last decade of last century, and its influence growing through the earlier part of the present, but generally in the shape of some sentimental embodiment of unworidliness, or some impossible incarnation of humble, half-grotesque purity—the country boys, for example, who are stock figures in the plays of the younger Colman, Reynolds, and their contemporaries. The form of old comedy which had employed the refined wit of Sheridan and the elder Colman, and the rare natural humor of Goldsmith, gradually degenerated into more and more trivial humors and stately eccentricities.

Tragedy, galvanised for a time by the electric power of the elder Keon into a more stirring and passionate life than the staid art of the Kembles could impart to it, dwindled into dullness. We saw the best of the art brought to its aid, besides his own vigor, his picturesque, and intelligent acting, and excellent stage management, all the attraction of a more complete and tasteful scenery and decoration than had ever till then been seen in the theatre. Charles Keon carried these aids and appliances still further, and by help of them kept the stage for a Shakespearean management of nine years, but only by dint of immense outlay, and with great expense from burlesque spectacles, and such "sensational" melodrama as the Corsican Brothers and Pauline. Even then, it is understood, that though his large outlay was returned to him, it was with little or no profit.

So long as the patent theatres survived, there was a home in them for artificial comedy as for formal tragedy, and a body of actors trained to represent both with more or less finish and completeness. But the same influences, called the popular or democratic if manners, political opinions, and literature, were at work in the theatre, both as theatrical privilege and to new-mould theatrical amusements. The patents were broken down; all theatres were opened to all kinds of entertainments; actors became scattered; and whatever of artificial or stately in stage art had been maintained by the barriers of privilege, or the influences of tradition, began to melt away and make room for ways of acting and forms of entertainment bearing a more popular impress. In the change much was lost which those who look back will always regret. But the change was a natural one, wrought out in obedience to wide-working natural laws, on the whole of a beneficent and beneficial kind. And if we lost the school of artificial acting, we turned over those who would have been pupils in it to the higher and subtler, if more difficult, school of life. The teaching in that school, though less systematic, and less easily enforced, is immeasurably better than any which can be obtained in the school which has now closed forever. But in the interval between the two systems, through which our actors are now passing, there is a time of transition, when we feel the want of the lessons of the one, and do not yet see the fruits of the other's teaching. And what is true of actors is true of pieces also. We have become impatient of the highly artificial comedy and long-drawn, acted, and remote tragedy of the last generation, but we have not yet learned upon the form of stage art in which our great natural cravings—that art for amusement and that for emotion—can be gratified, under conditions which satisfy refined as well as indiscriminating tastes.

To employ a pregnant distinction of Goethe's, our stage has discontinued the attempt to "realize the ideal," while it has not yet succeeded in the more fruitful effort to "idealize the real." The condition which every manager prescribes to the dramatist is to paint real life. As all real life is made up of joy and sorrow, it follows that what is sought is neither pure comedy nor unmix'd tragedy, but something which shall move in turn smiles and tears—which shall alternately amuse, and thrill, and move. It is worth remarking that there is hardly one of the plays of Shakespeare which does not fulfil this condition. Not one of his comedies but has its undercurrent of sadness or tenderness, breaking out in passages of sweetness and beauty which exquisitely enhance the gaiety, wit, and humor in which they are set; hardly one of his tragedies but has its note of humor, relieving the pity and terror out of which it breaks; and the same thing holds good, in the main, of all the best Elizabethan and Jacobean drama. Pure comedy and unrelieved tragedy are alike growths of a more corrupt and feeble time. It is so far a sign of health in the contemporary stage that the demand now is for drama, which admits the blending of tragic and comic elements. That this demand has thus far been responded to mainly by melodrama—by which I understand a form of piece in which the play of emotion and character is subordinated and sacrificed to startling incident and scenic effect—is not to be wondered at. It is not easy, on the business and decorum of the stage, to combine, and in a manner which is not too much of a strain, the domains of farce, slang, and vulgarity for the one, or resorting to the dark regions of crime and forbidden passion, or the thrilling effects of physical peril, for the other. These are the resources of the sensational drama, which for the moment all but exclusively occupies the stage. It is the exorbitant demand for real and contemporary incident, and strong emotion working together, and is displaced not by any revival of the dramatic masterpieces of another and widely different age, but by plays in which the same elements of dramatic effect are embodied in more artistic and refined forms. The elements of tragedy are always at work among us; and the selection and presentation of them in a dramatic form, with their due accompaniment of the gait, costume, humorous, and trivial, which, combined with wit, constitute the comic wool of life, will be the work of any conspicuous dramatic power to be found among us at this time.

That there are many things working against the development of such a talent I think may be shown. The tide of the time sets more to the writing of novels than of plays. Except in a few conspicuous cases, in which mere business talent and long experience of the theatre (before as well as behind the curtain) are combined with marked cleverness in the contrivance or adaptation of dramatic situations and the clothing them with dialogue, managers do not pay so well as publishers, and are, as a rule, much less liberal-minded, intelligent, and pleasant to deal with. Then, whatever vividness there may be in having your conceptions set forth in dramatic scenes, the enormous and inevitable disadvantages of imperfect or blundering presentation. For one character well embodied on the stage, the dramatist is likely to have ten marred or maimed by his actors if he trust them with anything beyond the most well-worn commonplace of the boards. The approaches of the author to the theatre are difficult and unpleasant. Managers, most of them actors or ex-actors, are too busy with the details of their daily work to give much attention to the dramatic essays of untried men; and the tried men are apt to be content with the tried subjects and sources of effect. Few of the managers have a standard of taste a shade higher than that of their public, or any aim beyond that of making their theatres pay by the most obvious means. They find or think it easier and safer to rely for profit and popularity on the class which now frequents the theatre, than to seek to attract a more fastidious or refined public, which they feel would be an narrower and harder to please. But, notwithstanding all these impediments, yet looking to our stage as a whole, and yet looking to our stage as a whole, and yet looking to our stage as a whole, we are apt to be content with the tried subjects and sources of effect. 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